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On the Wings of My Fathers

Larry EchoHawk

Echo Hawk: that is the English translation of the name given to my great-grandfather, a Pawnee Indian who did not speak English. He was born in the mid-1800s in what is now called Nebraska. Among the Pawnee, the hawk is a symbol of a warrior. My great-grandfather was known for his bravery, but he was also known as a quiet man who did not speak of his own deeds. As members of his tribe spoke of his good deeds, it was like an “echo” from one side of the village to the other. Thus he was named Echo Hawk.

According to accounts of the first white men who encountered the Pawnee people, the Pawnee were estimated to number about 20,000. Under the laws of the United States they had the right to occupy 23 million acres of land on the plains of Nebraska. When my great-grandfather was 19 years of age, the Pawnee people were forced to give up their homeland along the Platte River to make way for white settlers. In the winter of 1874 the Pawnee people were marched several hundred miles to a small reservation located near the Cimarron River in the Oklahoma Indian Territory.

Like so many other tribes before them, the Pawnee had their own Trail of Tears. Tears on that trail from the Platte to the Cimarron were shed for loss of a homeland, loss of the great buffalo herds slaughtered for their tongues and hides, and loss of a way of life. After arriving at that small Oklahoma reservation, the Pawnee people did not number 20,000. They did not number 5,000. Not even 1,000. Less than 700 Pawnee people survived.

That is a painful history. But the pain was not limited to one generation. In his childhood my father was taken from his parents by the federal government and sent to a boarding school far distant from his home. There he was physically beaten if he spoke the Pawnee language or in any way practiced his native culture or religion. In my generation my oldest

sister was sent home from a public school because her skin was the wrong color. I remember sitting in a public school classroom and hearing the teacher describe Indians as “savage, bloodthirsty, heathen renegades.” And, as I look back through past years, perhaps the most painful thought is the realization that in my childhood my family had no expectation of achieving a higher education and becoming doctors, lawyers, or engineers. A college education seemed beyond our reach.

But out of that pain was born promise. Of the six children born to my parents, all six of us went to college. Four of us graduated from Brigham Young University. Three of us became lawyers. We have received the best this country has to offer—the full promise of America.

The most vivid realization of that promise for me came in 1990. That year I ran for the office of attorney general of Idaho. I knew I faced a daunting task because there had not been a member of my political party elected as attorney general in 20 years. There had not been a person from my county elected to any statewide office in 38 years. And, in all the history of the United States, there had never been an American Indian elected to any statewide, state constitutional office (such as governor, lieutenant governor, secretary of state, or attorney general).

Furthermore, right after I filed my declaration of candidacy with the secretary of state, a political writer for the largest newspaper in the state wrote an article saying I had no chance to win the race for attorney general. He said: “Larry EchoHawk starts with three strikes against him: he is a Mormon, Indian, Democrat.” In response to this challenge, I just went out and worked as hard as I could on that campaign.

On election night I was at a hotel where voting results were being reported. Late that night I received a call from my opponent conceding the election. I remember hanging up the phone and thinking about what I should say to a large group of news reporters who were waiting for me to comment on that historic election. After a few moments of reflection, I walked out to meet the news media and made a statement. I did not have a written speech. I did not need one. I simply spoke from my heart, repeating words I had heard when I was 15 years old. They were spoken by a black civil rights leader on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial:

I . . . have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” . . .

I have a dream that my . . . children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character. [Martin Luther King Jr., “I Have a Dream,” speech at the Lincoln Memorial, Washington, D.C., 28 August 1963]

That night I felt the power of those words and the realization of that dream. I felt the full promise of America.

For me life began to change at the age of 14, when two missionaries from The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Lee Pearson and Boyd Camphuysen, came into my home and presented the missionary lessons. Up until that time I knew very little about Christian religion and had seldom attended any church. When the time came for the missionaries to challenge our family to be baptized, they first challenged my dad, then my mother, and then the children, starting from the oldest child and descending to the youngest. By the time they got to me, the second youngest in the family, everyone else had said yes. When they asked me, I remember looking at my dad. He had this stern look on his face, and I knew what my answer should be.

I was baptized, but I did not have a testimony of the truthfulness of the Restoration of the gospel of Jesus Christ through the Prophet Joseph Smith. I was, however, glad that my family had been baptized. Prior to joining the Church I had doubts about whether my family would stay together because my father had a drinking problem, and this had led to problems within our home. After we were baptized, my father quit drinking and family life was much better. However, I continued to live much the same as I had before I was baptized.

Fortunately my parents made me go to church every Sunday, and I had the benefit of listening to Sunday school teachers, priesthood leaders, and sacrament meeting speakers. I paid attention, but church attendance was not influencing my life.

Things began to change between my junior and senior years of high school when Richard Boren became my priests quorum advisor. I felt like he took a special interest in me. He was a successful lawyer, and I admired him very much. He told me repeatedly, "You can do anything you want. You can go to college, get a good education, and do wonderful things with your life." He pulled me aside and said, "If you really want to do well in sports, you have to work at it. You have to set goals and develop yourself."

At this point I was not a particularly good football player. Although I wasn't a bad athlete, I wasn't anything special. With Brother Boren's encouragement and guidance, I set my goal to become a good football player. We set up a program of weight lifting, running, and skills development.

I was small in size. To become a good football player I had to gain weight. Weight lifting would help, but I had to do more. I began mixing up a special weight-gaining formula to drink. It consisted of raw eggs, powdered milk, peanut butter, and other fattening things. I always put a little vanilla in it to make it taste better. It still tasted awful.

In one year I gained 20 pounds. When I showed up for football practice at the beginning of my senior year of high school, my football coaches could hardly believe their eyes. I thought I was going to be a defensive back, but when practices started, the coaches had me listed as

a quarterback. This was disappointing because the captain of the football team was the starting quarterback. I feared that I would again be on the bench. But I was prepared to compete, and I gave it everything I had on the practice field. After a few days of practice, I came into the locker room and saw my name listed as the first-team quarterback. I had beaten out the captain of the football team!

A life-changing moment occurred during two-a-day practices before the first game of the season. Between practice sessions I was playing with my brother and two friends. Someone threw a ball. I turned around at the wrong time, and the ball hit me squarely in the eye. It was a serious and painful injury. I was taken to the emergency room at the hospital. My eye was swollen shut. I couldn't see a thing out of that injured eye. The doctor told me and my parents that it was too early to tell, but I might lose the sight in that eye. He bandaged both eyes and sent me home.

I had to lie in bed for a week. You can imagine how devastating this injury was to me because I had worked so hard and the first game of the season was just a week away. I kept saying to myself, "How could this happen? Why me? How unfair?"

But this was a turning point in my life because, as I lay there in bed, for the first time I started to seriously think about the other things Brother Boren had talked about. He had talked about the gospel of Jesus Christ, the teachings of the Book of Mormon, and the power of prayer.

I remember slipping out of bed to my knees. It was the first time in my life that I had ever prayed intently. There I was, with bandages on my eyes, alone in my bedroom, praying for help. I remember saying, "Heavenly Father, please, if you are there, listen to my prayer and help me not lose the sight in my eye." I said, "I promise, if I can just keep the vision in my eye, I will read the Book of Mormon as Brother Boren has challenged me to do."

When the bandages came off, at first I could not see out of the injured eye. But gradually, day by day, my sight came back to near-perfect vision within a week.

My Farmington High School football team had played their first game, and the season was underway. Soon the doctor cleared me to practice with the team. I was able to travel with the team to the next game in Grand Junction, Colorado, but I didn't think I was going to play in the game.

That night our team fell behind by two touchdowns in the first half. Just before halftime my coach approached me and asked me if I wanted to play. I said yes. During halftime in the locker room the coach came to me and said my doctor and parents had cleared me to play. He said to be ready because I might get a chance to play in the second half of the game. Our team did not play well at the start of the second half. Finally the coach came to me and said, "The next time we get the ball, you are going in to play quarterback." I remember being on the sideline and kneeling on one

knee, like football players sometimes do to rest and watch the game. I just dropped my head and said a prayer. I whispered that prayer “with real intent” (Moroni 10:4) because I was about to face my biggest challenge on an athletic field. This would be my chance.

The coach called me over, told me the first play to run, and sent me into the game. The play was a bootleg, pass-run option. I was supposed to fake a handoff to the halfback, hide the football on my hip, and roll out around the end. If the field was clear, I was supposed to run with the ball. If the field was not clear, I was supposed to try to throw the football to a receiver. I took the snap, faked the handoff, and rolled out around the end. I could tell after just a few strides that I wouldn't be able to run the ball for a gain. The other team had the play well-defended. A defensive end was rapidly pursuing me and was about to tackle me for a loss. At the last second I saw one of my teammates downfield. I planted my foot, and—this is where the weight lifting paid off—I threw the football as far as I could. As soon as I turned the ball loose, I was clobbered. I was on my back when I heard a loud roar in the stadium. I remember thinking, “I don't know whether they are cheering for my side or the other side.” I jumped up and looked downfield. I saw my teammate with the ball 68 yards down the field in the end zone. It was a touchdown! That was the greatest moment of my teenage life. To me, it was an answer to my prayer.

I played the rest of the game. I passed for another touchdown and ran for two more. That night my team, the Farmington Scorpions, came from behind to beat the Grand Junction Tigers. The next day my name was in the headlines of our local newspaper.

I had another eventful football game that year in Albuquerque. We played the state championship team harder than they had been played in any other game that year. After the game ended, one of the football coaches from the University of New Mexico came into our dressing room. He introduced himself to me and said, “We like what we saw tonight.” He shook my hand and told me that he would be watching me the rest of the year.

When I recovered my sight after the accident, I had immediately started reading the Book of Mormon. I had not been a good student through junior high and high school. I struggled because my mind was not focused on school. I loved sports but not academics. The Book of Mormon would be the first large book that I had ever read from cover to cover.

As Brother Boren had suggested, I planned to read 10 pages every night. I never missed a nightly reading. When I finished the entire book, I knelt down and prayed. At that moment I had my first very strong spiritual experience. I knew then the Book of Mormon was true. I had received my most important answer to prayer. Up until that moment I had not realized that Heavenly Father had been watching over me and giving me answers to all my prayers for healing and for a witness of truth.

It seemed to me that the Book of Mormon was about my Pawnee Indian ancestors. The Book of Mormon talks about the Lamanites, a people who would be scattered, smitten, and nearly destroyed. But in the end they would be blessed if they followed the Savior. That is exactly what I saw in my own family's history. When I read the Book of Mormon, it gave me very positive feelings about who I am, knowledge that Heavenly Father had something for me to accomplish in life, and instruction in how I could be an instrument in His hands in serving the needs of other people.

After I had finished reading the Book of Mormon and football season had ended, I was sitting in a class one day when a student messenger passed me a note. It said I was to go see the football coach. I went down to his office. The door was closed. I knocked, and he said to come in. I opened the door and looked across the room. The head football coach of the University of New Mexico was sitting there. I remember that moment vividly because as soon as I saw him I knew I was going to college.

Brigham Young University also recruited me, but I wasn't sure if BYU would offer me a scholarship. I remember the meeting with Tommy Hudspeth, the head football coach. He asked me if I had any other scholarship offers. I said, "Yes, I have a full-ride scholarship to the University of New Mexico." I happened to have the scholarship offer from New Mexico in the notebook I was carrying. I handed him the letter, and he read it. He folded it up, handed it back, and said, "You have a full scholarship at BYU if you want it." My hard work, encouraged by Brother Boren, had paid off, opening a door to a college education. But, more important, a seemingly freak accident had opened a spiritual door through which celestial blessings have continued to pour on me and my family. Reading the Book of Mormon and receiving a testimony of it gave me an unexpected but welcome gift in my life.

Being a student-athlete at BYU for four years was a remarkable spiritual experience for me. I associated with many great men and women and learned important lessons in life under their tutelage. I became a product of the BYU experience. My testimony of the gospel of Jesus Christ grew, and I solidified my vision of what I should do with my life.

There was a companion spiritual influence in my youth: Spencer W. Kimball. He was one of my greatest mentors. At church in New Mexico, people talked about the apostle who had a great love for Indian people. The name of Spencer W. Kimball was revered. Prior to coming to BYU I met him at an Indian youth conference in Kirtland, New Mexico, a largely LDS community about 10 miles outside of Farmington. I remember standing out on a softball field with several other Indian youths, waiting for this apostle to come. There was a lot of anticipation. A car pulled up. Men in dark suits got out and started walking across the field toward all these young Indians waiting for the apostle. As the men approached, I stood there thinking, "Which one is he?" Finally he stepped forward. He

started talking to us in a raspy voice. My thought was, “Is this him?” The wonderful thing about him was that he befriended us all very quickly. This was a real feat because it is not easy to get close to Indian youths.

Later, when I was a student at BYU, I heard him speak several times. Like Brother Boren, he provided a blueprint for my life. When I was a BYU student he gave a speech entitled “This Is My Vision.” In this talk he related a dream: “I woke up and I’d had this dream about you—about the Lamanites. I wrote it down. It may be a dream. It may be a vision. But this is what I saw you doing.” In one part of the speech he said, “I saw you as lawyers. I saw you looking after your people. I saw you as heads of cities and of states and in elective office” (for a more detailed description of the 1946 dream, see Dell Van Orden, “Emotional Farewell in Mexico,” *Church News*, 19 February 1977, 3). To me it was like a patriarchal blessing and a challenge from a prophet of God: “Get an education. Be a lawyer. Use your education to help your people.” That is what I wanted to do. I carried an excerpt from that talk in my scriptures. At a certain point in my life I read the passage where he said we could become leaders of cities and states, and it was as if it were directed specifically to me. Even though I had never envisioned running for elective office, I knew that I could and should do it.

I loved President Kimball. The day he passed away, I cried. I was overcome because I had felt his love for me. I had seen so much of the good that he had accomplished for all people. But I was especially grateful for what he had done to lift Native Americans.

When I graduated from BYU, I decided to become a lawyer for one reason: to help Indian people. After graduating from law school I spent nine years working as the attorney for Idaho’s largest Indian tribe, the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes, located at the Fort Hall Indian Reservation. I saw a marvelous awakening under laws that now help Native Americans to become self-sufficient and economically strong. I have always thought it no accident that Indians were able to survive as a separate, identifiable people. I don’t know how the Lord is going to use such people in His ultimate plan, but I see many Native Americans who have been able to earn a college education and do the same kinds of things I have done. There has been a very definite positive cumulative impact.

During the Vietnam War I volunteered for service in the United States Marine Corps. Soon after I arrived in Quantico, Virginia, for boot camp, I found myself standing at attention in front of my bunk in our barracks along with 54 other Marine Corps recruits. I met my drill instructor when he kicked open the door to the barracks and entered while yelling words laced with profanity. He was a tough, battle-hardened veteran who had been previously wounded in Vietnam. He started at one end of the barracks and confronted each recruit one by one. Without exception, the drill instructor methodically found something about each recruit to ridicule with vulgar

language. I dreaded that it would soon be my turn. When it was my turn, the drill instructor grabbed my duffle bag and dumped my personal belongings onto my bunk. I could not see what he was doing because I had my back to my bunk, and we had been instructed to stand at attention with our eyes looking straight ahead. When we spoke to the drill instructor we had to call him “Sergeant Instructor” and yell out our words. The drill instructor looked through my things and grabbed my Book of Mormon. He then walked up to me, and I braced myself for his attack. I expected that he would yell at me as he had done with all the other recruits. Instead, he stood close to me and whispered, “Are you a Mormon?”

As instructed, I yelled, “Yes, Sergeant Instructor!”

Again, I expected he would then rip into me and my religion. He paused, raised his hand holding my Book of Mormon, and then, in a very quiet voice, said, “Do you believe in this book?”

Again I yelled out, “Yes, Sergeant Instructor!”

At this point I was sure he would yell out disparaging words about Mormons and the Book of Mormon. But he just stood there in silence. Finally he walked back to where he had dumped my personal things and gently laid my Book of Mormon down. He then proceeded to walk right by me without stopping and went on to the next recruit, who he ridiculed and disparaged with vile language. He thereafter did the same with every other recruit.

I have often wondered why that tough Marine Corps drill instructor spared me that day. But I am glad I was able to say without hesitation that I am a Mormon and that I know the Book of Mormon is true. That testimony is a precious gift given to me with the help of two missionaries, a priests quorum leader, and a prophet of God. For this I am very grateful.

I bear my testimony of the truthfulness of the gospel of Jesus Christ as contained in the Book of Mormon, and I do so in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

This devotional address was given to the BYU student body on August 7, 2007. Reprinted from “An Unexpected Gift,” Brigham Young University Speeches 2007–2008, 97–107 and the Clark Memorandum, spring 2008, 8–13.

Larry EchoHawk received his JD from the University of Utah in 1973, was elected Idaho state attorney general 1990–94, and served as a law professor at J. Reuben Clark Law School 1995–2009. He is currently serving as assistant secretary for Indian Affairs in the U.S. Department of Interior in Washington, D.C.